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ABSTRACT

Some individuals more readily develop learned helplessness in the classroom, so it is necessary for the educational system to acknowledge it and develop teaching methods to prevent it. Creating awareness among educators of this condition could greatly decrease its occurrence. Children who have a high risk of developing learned helplessness, especially disadvantaged children, should be evaluated periodically to detect its development before it becomes a serious problem. The experiencing of success by beginning students is important, as well as the development of coping mechanisms to prepare for eventual failures. (Author/LS)

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# Learned Helplessness and Academic Failure

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## Preface

Individual humans are very plastic in their behavior. As young humans grow and develop, some of this plasticity of behavior is limited or modified by the environment of the individual.

Some individuals quickly learn that the things they attempt work. ometimes they work quite well. These individuals find that, through their personal efforts, they are able to control their environment to a great degree. These individuals have learned the concept of "success". uccess oriented individuals never consider the possibility of failure. They do not even know what they would have to do to fail in a given situation.

Conversely, ther individuals have learned that the things they attempt do not work. Often, due to circumstances, hese individuals find themselves unable to control their environment. If an individual finds himself in this situation too often, he learns the concept of helplessness or "failure". ailure oriented individuals never consider the possibility of success. They quickly grow to learn, hat no matter what they do, they cannot succeed. They have no control over the environment and soon learn to quit trying even when a task is exceedingly simple and well within their capabilities. They have learned that they are helpless to control the competitive aspects of their lives. This is learned helplessness.[1]

We may think of helplessness as a psychological state frequently resulting from experiencing uncontrollable events. Nothing the individual does matters. In these situations, the final outcome is

totally independent of the voluntary responses of the individual.

In the formal classroom and in the larger classroom of life, learned helplessness plays a major role in the capabilities of a large proportion of students. In this narrative, we will attempt to relate the concept of learned helplessness to the educational experience by discussing the cause of learned helplessness, the effect of learned helplessness, and methods for overcoming and preventing learned helplessness in the individual.

The Development of Learned Helplessness

The Case of "Victor"

When reading instruction began in Victor's kindergarten and first grade classes, he was not ready. Victor had not yet reached the developmental stage during which he would be able to make the connection between the words written on paper and speech.

Even though he tried very hard, he made no progress. His answers were consistently wrong. The harder he tried and failed, the more reluctant he was to try again. He quickly became withdrawn in reading class.

Victor was bright and energetic at home and in all classes except reading. By the time he reached third grade, however, his problems with reading had caused an overall sulleness and actual defiant aggression in all areas of school. Victor's teacher had concluded that he was retarded and therefore, hopeless.

When examined by a psychologist, Victor demonstrated the ability and willingness to learn written language. The psychologist wrote Chinese characters on the blackboard and told Victor their meaning. Victor learned them immediately. Within two months, he had learned 150 words in Chinese. He still could neither read nor write in English.

Quite early, Victor had learned that he was unable to learn English. Through failure he had learned to be helpless with his own language in written form. He learned this, not because he had no potential to learn, but because he was expected to perform this task at a stage in his development when he was unprepared to do so.[2]

Noted behaviorist, Martin Seligman, discussed his findings and theories concerning learned helplessness at a recent meeting in Oklahoma. Most of the following discussion will be from his lecture with the exception of other citations.[3]

Seligman has found that in seemingly identical situations, some people learn to be helpless, while others do not. Which way do you turn to determine the reason behind such differences? Working with dogs, he found that two-thirds of them developed learned helplessness, while the remainder did not. The primary factor which seems to influence this development of learned helplessness in dogs was previous experience with escapable and inescapable events.

If a dog was exposed to electrical shock, but allowed to escape the situation, it would not develop learned helplessness even if it were later exposed to inescapable situations. If, however, a dog which had never experienced an escapable situation, was exposed to repeated inescapable situations (i.e., electrical shocks), they immediately became helpless.

Seligman extended this concept to cover learned helplessness in man. He believed early experiences with inescapable situations to be the major cause of learned helplessness in deprived children. From the time of their birth, such children observe poverty, hunger, discrimination and hopelessness. They perceive a world in which they and their families are forever incapable of escaping unpleasant situations.

The parents of deprived children were usually raised with similar deprived childhoods. Having experienced emotional and material deprivation, it is extremely difficult for them to give their children the warmth and affection they require. Mothers, in such situations, usually feel overwhelmed by hopelessness and helplessness. This results in their having even less emotional strength and support to give to their children.[4]

Typically, disadvantaged youngsters received far less sensory stimuli than non-disadvantaged children. This lack appears to be an important factor in later learning difficulties by preventing their rapid development of many early learning techniques.

The disadvantaged child is not encouraged when he achieves. He is discouraged to talk at home, especially when the talk concerned school. Often his parents are just too tired to listen. Because conversation is discouraged, or limited, at home, the vocabulary of the disadvantaged child suffers. When starting to school, his vocabulary may be far from adequate and he may lack many of the basic skills already developed by his classmates.

The deprived child's previous experience with life sets the stage for future development of learned helplessness when he begins school. As a result of these conditions, children who are not inherently vigorous and strong quickly learn to be passive. They withdraw from competition, becoming shy and isolated. They do not pay attention to the learning experiences of the classroom or become involved in the learning activities of the school environment.

In humans, Seligman found that unsolvable cognitive problems are usually the cause of learned helplessness. If, when a child begins school, he is not prepared, either because of a culturally deprived background or because he has not reached the developmental stage necessary for the cognitive abilities necessary for school, he is immediately put into a situation from which he can not escape and within which he can not make the appropriate responses.

For learned helplessness to develop fully at this stage, the individual must see the cause of his inability to make appropriate responses as, 1) internal, 2) stable, and 3) global.

If a child consistently gives wrong answers, while the other children in his class give correct answers, he begins to feel that something is wrong with him internally. He usually feels that this internal cause is lack of intelligence.

Seligman has found that if subjects were given unsolvable cognitive problems and were told that others tested had done well, they developed helplessness because they saw the deficit within themselves. The subjects who were told that others also had problems did not develop helplessness because they saw the source of their problems as external.

The stability of their deficit is the second aspect of helplessness. The individual comes to believe they have an internal deficit that will continue through time. A child who has difficulties in school from the beginning will miss the basics and his problem usually does

continue throughout his education, which reinforces his belief that he is a failure.

The third aspect of helplessness is seeing the deficit as global. The individual believes his deficit will affect all areas of his life since it is internal and stable. At this point, helplessness which might have begun in the classroom invades other areas of life. The individual becomes passive, withdrawn and less competitive in all situations and seems to lose interest in all activities. This can lead to severe depression and even suicide.

Once learned helplessness develops the individual is unable to solve the most simple problems that they could solve before helplessness developed. Responding declines, but when responding does occur and the responce works the individual has trouble learning, perceiving and believing that the response did indeed work.[5]

## The Effects of Learned Helplessness

Seligman found learned helplessness in disadvantaged black children as early as the second grade. When given I.Q. tests, it was found they would answer questions until they came across the first difficult one. If they could not easily answer the question they stopped trying, and would not attempt to answer further questions, no matter how simple. He hypothesized that learned helplessness is one of the major factors in the I.Q. score discrepancies between disadvantaged children and middle class children.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are most susceptible to helplessness as they begin school. They are not as well prepared as other children and start out handicapped by this. They make more incorrect responses and the cyclic effects begin. They make fewer responses because they do not receive positive reinforcement for them. They become withdrawn and passive. Their teacher believes they are mentally deficient and the child quickly learns this. Soon the self-fulfilling prophesy comes into effect.

The self-fulfilling prophesy is a principle proposed and studied by Rosenthal. Rosenthal defines the self-fulfilling prophesy as when one prophesies an event, the expectation of the event then changes the behavior of the prophet in such a way as to make the prophesied event more likely.[6]

Rosenthal and Jacobson set out to determine if the self-fulfilling prophesy was a correct idea. They gave every child in an elementary

school an intelligence test which was described as being a reliable prediction of intellectual blooming.

The school where the research was conducted was located in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood on the West Coast. Each grade at the school had three classrooms with the children separated according to ability. One class was for children with above average ability. Another was for children of average ability. The last was for children of below average ability.

Approximately 20 percent of the children in each classroom were chosen at random to form the experimental group. Teachers were given the names of this group and told that these children had scored high on the test. Therefore, they could be expected to demonstrate remarkable gains in intellectual development during the next eight months.

In actuality, the only difference between these children and their classmates was within the minds of their teachers.

At the end of the school year, all the children were given the same I.Q. test used at the beginning of the experiment. As a whole, the children who had been designated as bloomers showed only a slightly greater gain in verbal I.Q. than their classmates - 2 points. In total I.Q., however, the experimental group gained four points more on the average than their counterparts did. In reasoning I.Q., the average gain was seven points more than their classmates.

At the end of the school year, they asked the teachers to describe the classroom behavior of all their pupils. Teachers saw the children in the group designated as bloomers as more interesting more curious and happier. The teachers also found the bloomers to be slightly more appealing, better adjusted and more affectionate, with less need for social approval.

Teachers reacted negatively to unexpected improvement. The more the non-bloomer children gained in I.Q. points, the more they were regarded as less well-adjusted, less interesting and less affectionate. It would appear that there is danger to children of low ability groups when they demonstrate unpredicted intellectual growth, at least in the eyes of the teacher.

Rosenthal cited the work of Beez in order to shed light on the phenomenon of teacher expectancy. The pupils used by Beez in his study were 60 preschoolers from a summer head-start program. Each child had one teacher who taught him the meaning of a series of symbols. Half of the teachers were led to expect good symbol learning while the other half were led to expect poor symbol learning.

Beez found that the teachers with favorable expectations tried to teach more symbols to their pupils than the teachers who had unfavorable expectations. This is an indication that the teacher's expectations may not only result in subtle vocal and visual behavioral changes, but may also cause dramatic changes in teaching style. However, even when the amount of teaching was held constant, the

children who were expected to learn more did learn more.

If such an expectancy effect occurs in the laboratory and in the classroom, it does not suprise us to find it occurring in everyday life.

How does the self-fulfilling prophesy bring about the effected change in the student? An individual of higher status (teacher) is able to cause an individual of lower status (student) to conform to their suggestions. This may be a result of warmth and pleasant responses, or lack of such responses toward the student. The student, also , appears to receive many visual and vocal cues from the teacher as to how they should behave. They learn from the instructor's behavior whether or not they are conforming to the instructor's notion of how they should behave thus, whether or not they please the instructor.

It also seems that the self-fulfilling prophesy involves a reinforcement curve. As teachers work with the students in a manner which demonstrated their expectations, the students would tend to behave as expected. This, then, reinforced the teacher's belief in the prophesy, causing him to show even stronger expectancy. The student, without knowing it, are reinforcing the teacher's behavior; in return, the teacher reinforces their behavior. We see a cycle of reinforcement develop.

In the classroom, if a student is at first unsuccessful, the teacher begins to perceive them as unsuccessful. The teacher will then react toward them as an unsuccessful person, reinforcing the

child's poor self-image. The child then begins to perceive his lack of ability as internal, stable and global. The child has fallen victim to learned helplessness.[7]

Rosenthal proposed that some students suffer from a double handicap of belonging to the lower socioeconomic class and being black. Citing Leacock's work, he said that teachers are much less favorable to lower class children than middle class children. Forty percent of their comments about lower class children are negative as opposed to twenty percent negative comments about middle class students. Teachers were found to be even more likely to talk negatively about black children than white children, forty-three percent to seventeen percent.

I.Q. scores of both black and white middle class students were clearly related to the positive attitudes of their teacher. However, lower income students with high I.Q. scores were negatively viewed by the teachers, especially lower income children who were black.

Children who surpassed their teacher's expectations received resentment and complaint. This tended to increase the effect of learned helplessness. Students who are both black and lower income have a double handicap.

## Overcoming Learned Helplessness

Granting that learned helplessness does occur, and often occurs before the individual progresses very far in his education, what may be done to overcome it?

Seligman suggested four ways of attempting to overcome learned helplessness:

A). Make the learning environment better,

B). Modify task assignments,

C). Change student's values and goals, and

D). Change student's self-image.

To make the learning environment better, the teacher must lower the probability of bad events and increase the number of events which the student could control.

Modifying task assignments would involve the development of guaranteed success learning tasks. Such assignment would have to be designed around the needs and capabilities of the individual student in order to be certain that he could accomplish them successfully.

Changing values and goals is sometimes necessary, if the student has set unreasonable goals for himself. If a student does not have the ability to reach high goals, it is necessary to teach him to lower his goals to a realistic level so that he can achieve.

Changing a student's self-image includes all of the above plus the use of cognitive therapy. Cognitive therapy involves listing the

students bad points, then showing them plausible external reasons for these. The pattern of believing that the cause for these is internal, stable and global is then disrupted. The student is enabled to begin to build a positive self-image.

In the classroom, it is essential for the teacher to show the child that she has confidence in him. He will then begin to develop confidence in himself. The effect of such is often almost miraculous; the Pygmalion effect. Rosenthal proposed a four factor theory of the influences which produce the Pygmalion effect: climate, feedback, input and output. Teachers who have been led to expect good things from their students appear to:

a) Create a warmer social and emotional mood around these "special" students (climate),

b) Give more positive feedback to these students about their performance (feedback),

c) Teach more material and more difficult material to these students (input), and

d) Give the special students more opportunity to respond and question (output).

Obviously, the Pygmalion effect is merely another way of looking at the self-fulfilling prophesy. Perhaps the best way to effectively overcome learned helplessness is through the positive use of the Pygmalion effect to better the individual student's self-image.[8]

## Prevention of Learned Helplessness

The best way to prevent learned helplessness is prior experience with escapable events. The individual must become aware of his ability to control his environment. If the child comes from a disadvantaged background, he must be exposed to new experiences to increase sensory stimulation. He must also be given the opportunity to play with other chilren, therefore, learning the necessary social skills. Through these new experiences, he learns others are interested in and participating in what he is doing. Head Start programs usually provide these experiences quite well.

If the child is beginning school, every effort should be made to assure him of some successes, no matter how small. As Irving N. Berlin states:

> " With each increment of learning, each integrative experience with an understanding adult, enhances the child's view of himself as a more effective person and potentiates his continued learning." [9]

It is important for children to develop coping mechanisms. Life can not be filled with rewarding experiences, so learning to deal with failure when it arises is essential for a well adjusted personality. If a child is exposed to both successes and failures, and can effectively deal with both, he can develop a sense of his own competence. Learning to try harder after a failure and finally achieving a goal will increase an individual's self-esteem and he will be able to realistically view how he measures up to society's standards.[10]

## Summary and Conclusions

In the classroom, learned helplessness can easily be developed by certain individuals, so it is necessary for our educational system to acknowledge it and strive to develop teaching methods to prevent its development. Making more educators aware of this condition could greatly decrease its occurrance, because they would be able to spot it and take measures to prevent or treat it. Children who have a high risk of developing learned helplessness, specially disadvantaged children, should be evaluated periodically to detect its development before it becomes too much of a problem and invades other areas of their lives.

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